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*THE  
CAMPAIGN  
IN GREECE  
AND CRETE*

THE ARMY AT WAR

The campaign described in this book will occupy a proud place in the story of the British and Imperial armies' exploits in this war. The introductory chapter explains on what grounds—of national honour as well as long-term strategy—the decision to support the Greeks was taken, and the remaining chapters describe in detail the heroic rearguard action, first down the length of the Greek peninsula and then across the mountains of Crete, in which the campaign for the most part consisted. The book is a tribute to the fighting qualities of the Imperial and Greek armies and their toughness in the face of overwhelming difficulties. It covers all the military operations between the arrival of the Imperial Expeditionary Force in February, 1941, and the evacuation from Crete in June, 1941. It is illustrated by six line maps, two showing the general setting of the campaigns in Greece and Crete, and four more which detail the most crucial of the actual operations.

**THE CAMPAIGN IN  
GREECE AND CRETE**

The story of the campaign up to the evacuation  
of the Greek mainland is by David Garnett.

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Gt. Brit War Office,  
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# THE CAMPAIGN IN GREECE AND CRETE

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THE ARMY AT WAR

LONDON  
HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE  
1942



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## CONTENTS

I.	WHY WE WENT TO GREECE	.	.	<i>page</i>	5
II.	THE ARMIES COME TO GRIPS	.	.	„	14
III.	THE CRUCIAL BATTLES	.	.	„	26
IV.	THE EVACUATION	.	.	„	34
V.	THE BATTLE FOR CRETE	.	.	„	43

## MAPS

Greece and Crete	.	.	.	.	<i>pages</i>	8-9
Attack Without Warning	.	.	.	.	<i>pages</i>	24-25
The Crucial Battles	.	.	.	.	<i>page</i>	31
The Path of the German Armies	.	.	.	.	„	37
The Evacuation From Greece	.	.	.	.	„	41
The Campaign In Crete	.	.	.	.	<i>pages</i>	56-57

## THE CAMPAIGN IN GREECE AND CRETE

I. *Why we Went to Greece*

WHEN A CAMPAIGN ends in disappointment or in disaster, every pundit at once asks why it was ever started. But history often records that a failure is as glorious and, on the long view, as useful as a victory. It is already pretty certain that this will be history's verdict on the campaign in Greece. On a superficial view, the sending of an expeditionary force to Greece may seem to have owed very much to political and to sentimental considerations. Both were, indeed, strong. On April 13th, 1939, the British Government had guaranteed the independence and integrity of Greece in an attempt to deter the Germans from the war upon which, after the seizure of the rump of Czecho-Slovakia in March, they were clearly bent. That guarantee stood in fair weather and in foul alike. Moreover, the successful defiance of the Italian onslaught had filled the whole civilised world with admiration for the Greeks.

Here were a people who not only had the right to help but who also deserved help. British public opinion had already shown itself extremely sensitive to arguments based on chivalry and sentiment. The failure to rescue Norway had led to the overthrow of the Chamberlain Government. It was rightly felt that every consideration of honour dictated the maximum possible help to Greece. But it would be misleading to suppose that there were not equally strong military reasons for the adventure. As Mr. Churchill stated in his review of the campaign, the military authorities considered that there was a line which, given certain circumstances, could be successfully defended. The Greek campaign was not undertaken as a hopeless or suicidal operation. It turned out to be a

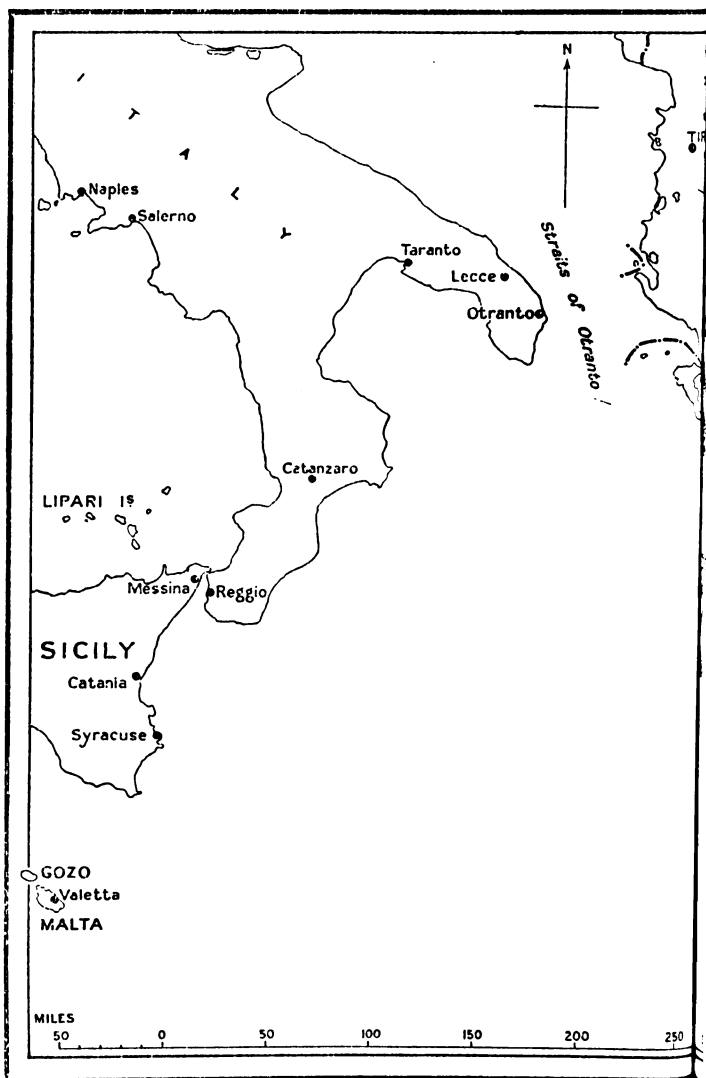
rearguard action only, though even so it was not without a salutary influence on the enemy's strategy in the Near East. But there was, at the outset, a reasonable hope that it might be something better.

When Italy invaded Greece in October, 1940, the Greeks at once asked for British help in the air, and we gave them what we could. We also, at their invitation, occupied Crete, which the Italians might otherwise have seized. The Greeks did not ask us to send troops on to the mainland to help them, nor at that time had we any troops to spare from the defence of Egypt, which was then threatened both from Libya in the west and from Eritrea and Abyssinia in the south. Although the Italian army had an initial success which brought it to the River Akheron, south of Yannina (properly, Ioannina) the Greek army drove it out of Greece and might very possibly have driven it right out of Albania if the worst snowstorm in living memory had not swept the mountains and the weather continued for a long time to be very bad. This not only made the bringing up of supplies for the Greek army almost impossible, but it greatly reduced the help which could be given by the Royal Air Force. Time and again our bombers set out, only to find it impossible to reach or to identify their targets in the driving snow.

Besides helping the Greeks against the Italians in the air and on the sea, we sent them all the help we could in the way of arms, munitions and lorries. The Greek army was equipped with weapons purchased from several different countries which were no longer able to supply them with ammunition, since they had been occupied or conquered by Germany. Supplies were dispatched from America, but little had arrived by the time of the German conquest. Captures of Italian arms and munitions were, from the first, the chief source of supply for the Greek army. During General Wavell's successful advance into Libya, we captured immense quantities of Italian arms

and munitions which had been collected for the invasion of Egypt. As soon as these could be sorted out, we sent to Greece all the captured Italian arms for which there was sufficient ammunition. In spite of all we could do, the German attack found the Greek army very imperfectly equipped by modern standards. They had no tanks and few anti-tank weapons. They had few lorries. Their divisions were practically entirely marching infantrymen, relying on pack transport, and the ration on which they fought so well was chiefly brown bread. This is not so bad as it sounds to British ears, because brown bread is the normal Greek army ration, and that army had been trained for mountain warfare, for which its equipment was well suited so far as it went. But once out of the mountains, the odds were very uneven.

It will be seen that up to a point Anglo-Greek strategy worked extremely well. General Wavell's offensive in Libya coincided with the moment when the failure of the Italian armies in Albania had everywhere reduced Italian morale to a very low ebb. The Greek victories were undoubtedly of immense indirect assistance to us. Our victories enabled us to give far greater direct assistance to the Greeks than we could otherwise have done. And if, in the end, the drain away from Libya to Greece prevented a proper follow-through of General Wavell's drive and finally reduced him, so to say, to some desperate work with a niblick in a bad bunker, that must not be taken as a condemnation of the attempt to play on two courses at once. The enemy struck back in Libya, as General Wavell himself has stated, a month earlier than he expected. His blow drove us back into Egypt. But if there had been no previous advance, it might well have driven us back to Suez ; and there would have been no Tobruk to use as a lever back to the ledge of victory. In so far as the Greek resistance first discouraged and then distracted the enemy, it was strategically invaluable ; even though it ended in tactical defeat.





With the German occupation of Rumania and then of Bulgaria, a German invasion of Greece became more and more probable and the Greeks knew that if this happened they could not win alone. They were determined to do nothing to provoke the Germans. That was one reason why they did not ask for British troops to help them against the Italians at the beginning of the war. But, though they would not provoke the Germans, they were determined to resist them whether we gave help or not. They knew that, if the Germans came, the odds would be too heavy and they would be doomed to be defeated, unless heavily reinforced. But they were determined that in any case the Italians should gain no credit by it. The Italians were their real enemies. The Germans were the instruments of that malignant *Nemesis Adrasteia*—"one from whom there is no escape"—who the ancient Greeks believed pursued and punished those who were too happy, or too fortunate.

### *Greek Morale versus German Menace*

The attitude of the Greeks must be kept in mind before the strategy of the Greek generals can be criticised. It seems obvious to us that directly the German attack became imminent, the Greek army should have been withdrawn from Albania to form a new line further south. But if the troops, who had been driving the Italians all the winter further and further into the mountains of Albania, had been withdrawn to hold a new line far back in their own country, their fighting spirit might have been broken. The Greeks are not a slow, unemotional people like ourselves.

"A merry heart goes all the day,  
Your sad tires in a mile-a"

wrote Shakespeare, and the words are more true of the Greek than of the British soldier.

Before the German army occupied Bulgaria, large numbers of air bases had been constructed there in semi-secret by ground staff of the German Air Force dressed in civilian clothes and disguised as "tourists." Purely military reasons should have led the Greeks to ask us to counter this threat with an equal number of British air bases in Greece. This was not done because the Greeks were most anxious not to provoke the Germans, with whom they were not at war. Neither had we sufficient resources in aircraft and pilots to be able to send a large air force to Greece.

It must be remembered that Germany has air bases spread over practically the whole of Europe. She can therefore transfer her air force from one end of it to the other in the space of a few days. We have to send our short-range aircraft by ship in heavily escorted convoys. Britain was therefore not only weaker than Germany in the air, but her air force was less mobile. We could not afford to transfer fighters to Greece which might be needed later for the defence of Britain in the event of an attempted invasion. Nor could such transfers be made swiftly. The usefulness of aircraft depends upon proper maintenance. Every aircraft has to be in the hands of fitters, riggers and armourers for nearly as many hours on the ground as it spends in the air. Nor can these specialists do their jobs without workshops equipped with hundreds of different tools and spare parts. It was the time needed for such preparations which delayed German help to Italy all through the winter.

### *The Imperial Force Arrives*

It was not till the middle of February that the Greek Government realised that a German invasion of Greece was inevitable, and informed us that it would fight whether we sent further help or not. Mr. Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, and Sir John Dill, the Chief



of the Imperial General Staff, were in the Middle East and visited Athens. After consultation with, and on the advice of, General Wavell, the British Government decided that help must be sent.

The force originally detailed consisted of one United Kingdom Armoured Brigade, the New Zealand Division, and two Australian Divisions, with some British Corps Artillery—the whole under the command of General Sir H. M. Wilson, who had made a great name for himself in Libya and was afterwards to conduct the Allied operations in Syria. Most of these troops had taken part in the victorious Libyan campaign. But one of the Australian Divisions was never sent because it was needed too badly in Africa to meet General Rommel's first counter-offensive; and the last brigade of the other Australian Division did not reach rail-head at Larisa until the German attack was well under way. There was no loss of time. When people talk of "sending an army" they often forget that the fighting units are only the first rank of a huge organisation. Behind have to be ranged many ancillary elements, such as supply units; stores, depôts and workshops with their skilled staffs; roadmaking, port, and railway staffs; military pioneer units; and, last but not least, hospitals and medical staffs. Many of these ancillary units had to be sent on ahead to prepare for the arrival of the main body. They started going early in March, and the rest of the Expeditionary Force followed at irregular intervals throughout the month. The R.A.F. had to have at least as many ancillary services as the Army.

The reader may draw a contrast between all this paraphernalia and the apparent absence of anything comparable on the enemy side. The difference was due to the tasks and the nature of the opposing forces. The task of the British Army was to establish itself in Greece in order to hold Greece, and therefore it had to compress into the peninsula services which the Germans could spread over a larger space and longer land distances. The Germans

were advancing, and, as in France, their spearhead of tanks was far ahead of its rations and lived on the country. Even the other forces following up did the same. The Germans did not care whether they stripped the country, or what happened to civilians whom they robbed. After all, their avowed object was robbery. The *Manchester Guardian* special correspondent reported the following story of two British soldiers who were taken prisoner but escaped and rejoined our forces :—

“The thing which struck our men most about the Germans was their ravening hunger. In about ten minutes eight of them gobbled up the fortnight’s rations which our two men were carrying. All the German troops they saw were in similar case, living on the country and seizing every scrap of food they could find in shops and houses.”

Little need be said about the actual transportation of our troops except that, thanks to the Royal Navy, it was carried out without the loss of a single ship. Something must be said, however, about two operations which took place while the transportation of our troops was still in progress. Both may be considered to have occurred partly, if not entirely, as a result of their having been sent.

While the Royal Navy was engaged in convoying our troops to Greece, a great part of our reconnaissance aircraft and our small surface craft was occupied in escorting transports and protecting them. Naval and air vigilance over the central Mediterranean was therefore inevitably relaxed. The Germans seized the moment to send a powerful armoured force to the assistance of the Italians in Tripolitania. This force was indeed more powerful than that which we were sending to Greece. The situation at the end of March was therefore rather like that of two men passing each other through a revolving door. While we pushed into Europe, the Germans pushed into Africa. The German armoured forces might possibly have been able to slip through the vigilance of our blockade even if we had not been occupied with send-

ing an army to Greece. But their rapid reconquest of Libya was the result of our having withdrawn our troops. The details of the enemy's advance and of his threat to Egypt and to our entire position in the Middle East cannot be considered here. It was part of the price we had to pay for keeping our word. Fortunately the enemy was made to pay a price, too.

It is no part of this account of the expedition to Greece to deal with the battle of Matapan. The Admiralty will in due course issue the story of this remarkable action in which the Italian fleet was decisively defeated and prevented from interfering with our convoys to Greece without any cost whatever to our own Forces. The results of this action must, however, be taken into account in drawing up the balance sheet of the campaign in Greece. Though we paid a heavy price in Libya for weakening our forces there, the enemy also had to pay "cash down" in ships and men for trying to stop us from helping Greece.

## II. *The Armies Come to Grips*

THE EFFICIENCY of the Royal Navy revealed in the battle of Matapan gives an indication of the way in which British help was carried to Greece without loss.

The chief port of disembarkation was the Piraeus (properly, Piraievs)—the port of Athens. This does not mean that many of our troops saw much of Athens itself. They were transported swiftly in British lorries, and by rail, to the north of Greece. Some of our troops were also disembarked at Volos, which was only about forty miles from Larisa, the advanced British base. Some critics may have wondered why the large port of Salonika (Thessaloniki) was not used, since the forward position of our troops was only some twenty or thirty miles from it. One reason was that it was considered too vulnerable to

German air attack. Salonika is only some forty miles as the crow flies from the Bulgarian frontier. For that reason no use was made by us of the aerodromes in the Salonika plain or to the east of it. They were, however, used by the enemy immediately he had captured these districts.

The force sent to Greece consisted of some 58,000 soldiers. Of these at most 35,000 men were fighting formations. The remaining 23,000 belonged to administrative units for the supply and maintenance of the field army. The force was a large slice out of General Wavell's staff.

### *The Imperial and Greek Forces*

The New Zealand and Australian Divisions each consisted of more than 10,000, but less than 15,000 men. Each had its own Divisional artillery of 25-pounder field guns and 2-pounder anti-tank guns. Each Division had also its own anti-tank regiment. The New Zealand Division had in addition a "Divisional Cavalry Regiment" which in these days means a fully mechanised force equipped with tanks and Bren-gun carriers. Besides a specialised anti-tank regiment, every unit of each division had its own anti-tank rifles and light machine-guns. Each Brigade was armed with a certain number of Tommy-guns as well as with rifles.

But though each Division was equipped with a large number of motor vehicles, neither was motorised in the sense that every soldier could be transported in a vehicle at the same time. The United Kingdom armoured Brigade was, and the German motorised Divisions operating in Greece were, motorised in this sense.

The armoured Brigade was composed of between 3,000 and 4,000 men with upwards of a hundred tanks. Besides these it had its own artillery, its anti-tank regiment and its Royal Engineers. Like the Australian and New Zealand Divisions, it was equipped with anti-tank rifles and machine-guns and some light mortars. As for the

strength of the R.A.F., it was inevitably heavily outnumbered by the enemy.

At the time when British help was arriving, the Greeks had fourteen Divisions of their army in Albania, and three and-a-half Divisions on the Bulgarian frontier to the east of Salonika, holding the Metaxas line. Three Greek Divisions were to co-operate with our forces. These were the 20th, the 12th and the 19th. The 20th Division was composed of reservists, older men who had done no fighting. The 12th Division was composed of soldiers who had been called up before the war but had done no fighting. These Divisions, if at full strength, should each have been of about 15,000 men. The 19th Division was new and was the only Greek motorised Division. There were about 8,000 men in it and it was equipped with a most miscellaneous collection of vehicles ranging from Italian army lorries, mostly from Libya, to taxi-cabs from Athens.

The Greek troops were armed with rifles and a fair number of machine-guns. They had Divisional artillery. They had no anti-tank guns and practically no tanks. The reader must realise, if he does not already do so, that no number of infantry armed with rifles can stop a tank. A tank is impervious to rifle bullets. It follows that the Greek troops could only stop the German tanks by means of their artillery, fired usually at point blank range, or by various trapping devices. The Greek troops were magnificently courageous. But courage is not enough against tanks and dive-bombers. On the other hand, really brave men, like the Greeks, achieve occasional miracles, and did achieve miracles in the mountain country where their training for mountain warfare stood them in good stead and their lack of mobility over long distances was not an insuperable handicap. Let no one be so foolish as to think that because the Greeks were not equipped to beat the Germans, all their bravery was thrown away. It was not.

The Allied plan was that the three-and-a-half Greek Divisions on the Metaxas line should fight a delaying action, inflicting what damage they could on the Germans, but that the main defensive position should be held by British and Greek forces on a line running along the high ground west of the Vardar (in Greek, the Axios) valley. There had been no conversations with the Yugoslav staff, but the Yugoslavs were expected to hold the passes along their frontier from Bulgaria.

### *Attack Without Warning*

At dawn on April 6th, the Germans crossed the Bulgarian frontier without warning, attacking the strip of Greek territory running east of Salonika to the Turkish frontier. At the extreme eastern end of this strip it was not intended that they should be seriously opposed, and they reached the sea at Alexandroupolis after three days. Elsewhere the Greeks fought with astonishing tenacity and bravery. At the Rupel Pass the Germans dropped parachute troops behind the Greek lines, though not on a big scale. A hundred out of a body of a hundred and fifty were killed and the remainder surrendered.

In spite of the most violent attacks by tanks and shock troops and dive-bombers, the Greeks held on, inflicting very severe losses on the enemy. The forts in the Rupel Pass held out for a week. Further east, on the Nevrokopi plateau, the fort of Davtavil, which had been captured by the Germans, was recaptured in a counter-attack.

The resistance of the Greeks in this area could not, however, be prolonged, since they were soon cut off from the rest of Greece by the German capture of Salonika. While devoted rear-guards held up the German advance, as many as possible of the Greek troops were evacuated by sea. Some were taken to Crete, others to garrison other islands which have since been captured by the Germans.

Simultaneously with their attack across the Bulgarian frontier on Greece, the Germans invaded Yugoslavia, also without warning. With the attacks on the north of that country, launched from Austria, from Hungary, and across the Danube from Rumania, and with the savage air bombardment which laid the open city of Belgrade in ruins, we are not here concerned. The attack on southern Yugoslavia, however, transformed the whole character of the Greek campaign.

### *The Weak Spot*

The Yugoslav army was not fully mobilised when the Germans attacked. Its forces were not disposed in the parts of the country best suited for defence. It was not mechanised. It was not mobile by modern standards. It had no effective anti-aircraft defences, no anti-tank weapons and no tanks. The greater part of the Yugoslav army was in the north, and the new Simovich Government had not had time to do more than despatch large reinforcements to the south. Tens of thousands of men were marching, carrying packs and rifles, with their baggage in ox-waggons which regulated the pace of the columns. The German Air Force caught them like that. The dive-bombers swooped out of the low cloud and the long winding columns—150 miles jammed with marching men and beasts and carts crawling at a foot pace—were bombed and strafed and blasted. The German aircraft flew along emptying their machine-guns, when they had used up their bombs, on what must have seemed an almost stationary target. That was the end of the Yugoslav reinforcements which should have held the southern passes from Bulgaria.

About seven miles north of where the river Struma (in Greek, the Strimon) enters Greece through the Rupel Pass, it receives its main tributary, the Strumitsa, which joins it at right angles flowing from Yugoslavia. At the

same time as the Germans launched their attack down the Struma, they made another attack up the Strumitsa. Unfortunately, the Yugoslav forces there were small, and they were not in a position to offer serious resistance. The gap through the mountains where the Strumitsa flows was not held, and the German armoured force drove through and then turned south, round Lake Doīrani and down the Vardar valley. The Vardar Pass was not held in strength by the Greeks, and on the evening of April 8th, less than three days after beginning their attack, the Germans had captured Salonika. They had travelled a hundred miles, much of it difficult country. They had passed along a road running for twenty-five miles within five miles of the Greek frontier which commands it throughout its length from a mountain range 5,000 feet high.

One armoured Division and one mountain Division came round Lake Doīrani and down to the Vardar valley. These troops were probably afterwards reinforced by those which had been attacking through the Rupel Pass and to the east, after the withdrawal of the Greek troops in that region. These invaders now faced the line held by the British Imperial forces and the Greeks.

### *Outflanked and Outarmoured*

Far more dangerous was the other advance which had been made into Yugoslavia further north. German armoured forces reached Skoplje on April 7th—that is, in one day. Other German forces drove through Štip and reached Prilep. These extremely strong forces converged at Monastir.\* The German forces turned south at

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\* It may be helpful, and not merely confusing, for the reader to remember that most places in these parts of the world have two or three names—the Turkish, one modern Greek, and one Slav. The ancient Greek name is often different also. Monastir's other name is Bitolj. On these pages the modern Greek name is used, but the alternative version is also mentioned when it's the more familiar one.



Monastir to enter Greece by two roads north of Florina. They had thus outflanked the carefully prepared line which the Greeks and British were holding along the high ground west of the Vardar valley.

The Greek and British commanders had hoped the Yugoslavs would arrange to hold the passes into southern Yugoslavia. When the Germans had, in fact, driven through without effective opposition, there remained only the hope that bad roads might for at least a few days slow down their advance. The hope was slender. Every enterprising motorist knows that he can take a powerful car almost anywhere where there is a track. Lorries are tougher than cars, and tanks a great deal tougher than lorries. They are built to go anywhere, and the mountain tracks of Greece and Yugoslavia presented no insuperable obstacles. To believe they would was an example of the kind of wishful thinking that is one of our greatest dangers to-day. The mountain roads of the Ardennes were believed to be impassable to large numbers of troops until the German armoured forces drove through them to conquer France.

Excluding the forces which had attacked east of Salonika, one armoured Division and one mountain Division of infantry came down the Vardar to Salonika. Two more armoured Divisions were about to enter Greece south of Monastir. The Adolph Hitler S.S. Division of fully motorised infantry was also entering Greece south of Monastir and making for Florina. A German armoured Division was at the time equipped with 416 tanks, including tanks heavier than any with the British armoured Brigade. Besides the tanks, each of the Brigades which make up the German Division has its motorised machine-gun battalion of armoured cars and cyclists, a motor cyclist battalion and a lorried infantry regiment. Each Division also has an anti-aircraft and anti-tank battalion allotted to it, armed with 8·8 cm. guns which can be used with equal effect either against aircraft or against tanks. These

belong to the "Flak" troops and are therefore technically part of the German Air Force.

The position was therefore that the very extended British and Greek line was facing an enemy armed with three times as many tanks and enjoying very much greater air support, while behind their left flank the enemy was bearing down in greater strength with another 832 tanks.

The Greek Corps was not yet properly in position, so that facing these two armoured and one motorised Divisions were some 2,000 Greek Frontier Guards armed with rifles. Immediate steps had to be taken to check the German advance.

It might have been checked earlier, indeed all the enemy's advance into southern Yugoslavia might have been somewhat delayed, had not mist and low cloud during the period from April 6th till April 12th greatly handicapped all air operations. The enemy was therefore able to advance faster and with far less loss than if the weather had been favourable. In some places his mechanised columns were seen advancing along the roads with their vehicles three abreast.

### *Bad Weather Hampers the R.A.F.*

The Royal Air Force did, however, carry out a large number of raids which deserve mention. Twelve Hurricanes carried out a patrol of the Bulgarian frontier on April 6th and encountered thirty Me. 109's, shooting down five of them with no loss to themselves. That night six of our Wellington bombers raided Sofia, causing considerable damage to the railway station where trucks were thrown into the air and many explosions were caused. One Wellington machine-gunned enemy motor transports in the Struma valley on its return. The same night, Blenheims bombed other important targets. But bad weather continually made the tasks of our aircraft impossible. Thus on April 8th, though nineteen Blen-

heims were able to bomb enemy transport and tanks in the Strumitsa valley and near Lake Doirani, twelve other Blenheims had to abandon their task. On April 9th, twelve Blenheims bombed their targets and twelve failed to find them, though several made more than one attempt during the day. On the 10th, twenty-four Blenheims got through and successfully bombed enemy motor transport and tanks. In the first attack nine Blenheims destroyed five tanks and probably more, besides lorries and other vehicles. But the majority of our aircraft were forced to return that day without finding their targets owing to the appalling weather. Such was the tale of endeavour and frustration. It is practically impossible to fly through driving snowstorms.

But when the scale of the German preparations is considered, it becomes apparent that our air force was insufficient in numbers to do more than harass and delay the enemy advance even under perfect weather conditions.

### *Men Against Machines*

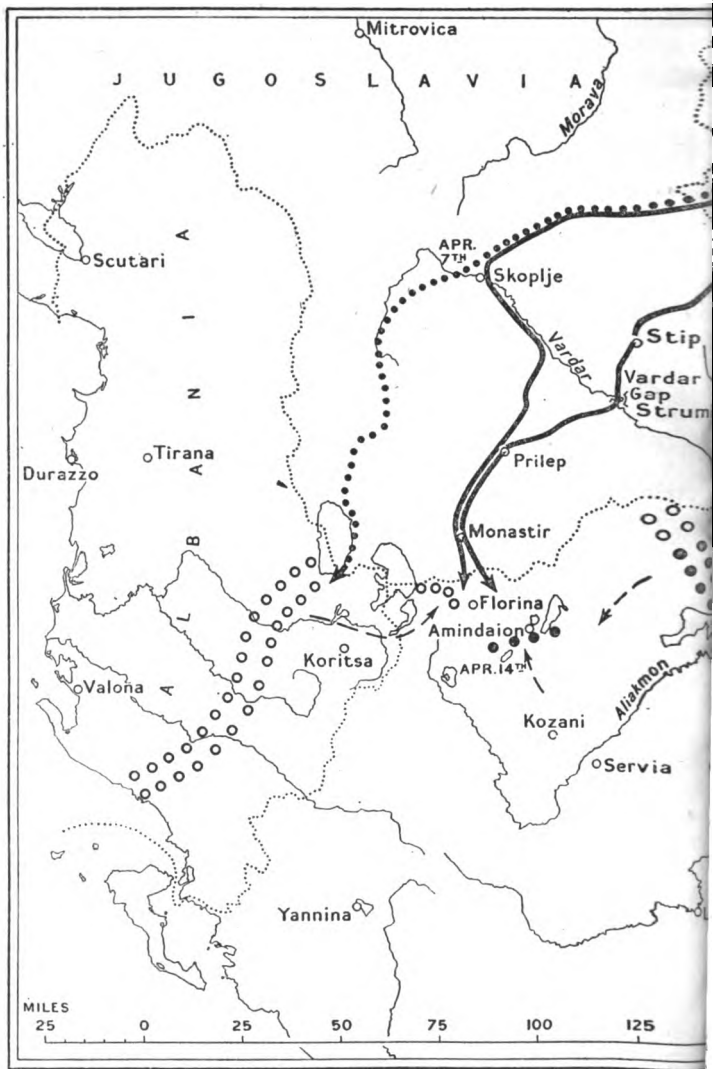
The Greek army had withdrawn its only cavalry Division from Albania. It was sent north of Florina, which was the railhead and chief supply base of the Greek army in Albania. There the Adolph Hitler S.S. motorised Division ran into it. A battle, not unlike some of those fought in Poland in spite of the difference of the country, ensued. It was a battle between the old and the new ways of warfare, and the extraordinary courage of the Greeks could not avail against the fire-power of modern weapons. It did, however, check the Germans effectively for some little while, and thus it helped to give the Greek and British line time to swing round to meet the thrust.

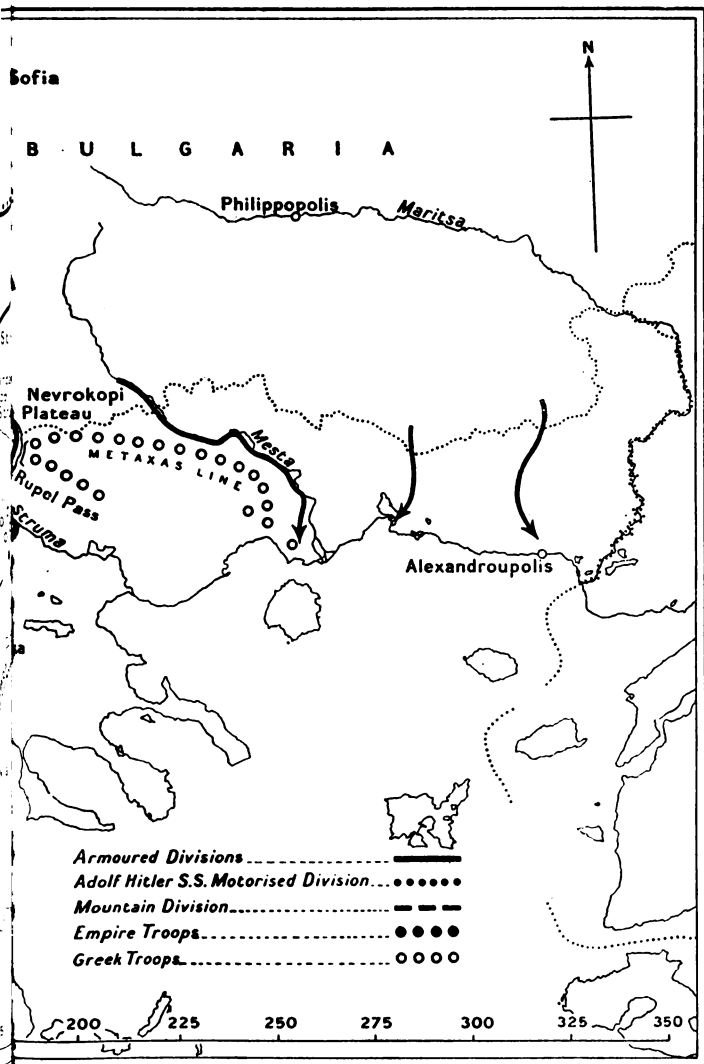
Besides the Greek cavalry, a force under General Mackay was rapidly formed and swiftly reinforced at Amindaion, covered by the 2nd Armoured Brigade. It consisted of an Australian Brigade, a machine-gun bat-

talion, an artillery regiment and an anti-tank regiment. On April 9th, mechanised machine-gun units of this force went over into Yugoslavia, as far north as Monastir, thirty miles north of Amindaion, and shot up German troops de-bussing in the town. Then they retired. Two days later the German armoured Divisions engaged General Mackay's force south-east of Florina and hard fighting ensued for two days. The Germans outnumbered the Mackay force by something like ten to one and had some 800 tanks. An Australian correspondent, writing on April 13th, describes this phase of the fighting as follows in *The Times* of April 16th :

" Since the Germans began to invade Greece our men have been fighting in the snow, sleeping huddled together for warmth, wrapped in one or two blankets which they were able to carry. It is perishingly cold, though some young veterans say that it is no colder than the night winds of Libya in January and December. The bright side of the picture is that rain has evidently bogged the Bulgarian aerodromes. Few German aircraft have been going overhead ; on the other hand our bombers have been going over in waves throughout the whole day.

" Libya was like a billiard table compared with the terrifying ranges and yawning ravines here. The roads which thread the mountains are narrow and tortuous . . . I set out to visit different sectors of the front early in the morning. The going was fairly slow because of the endless line of army traffic on the roads—supply wagons, carriers, and guns moving up between the precipitous walls of the passes. The wind was cruel. It was blowing off the new snow-fields formed on the mountain tops by the falls of last night. Truck drivers clung to their steering wheels with numb fingers. Their faces were blue with cold. I saw many groups of Greek soldiers swinging along on foot with their rifles slung over their shoulders. I passed a battery of light guns drawn along by teams of shaggy mountain ponies . . . I met knots of refugees upon the road . . . I found men of an Australian infantry battalion deep in the mountains. They were watering their donkeys at a stone trough fed from a spring. The country in which these troops





are deployed is too craggy and precipitous for motor transport, and they are hauling up their food, ammunition and other supplies on the backs of donkeys. Some units of the Allied troops are living under very trying conditions on the snowclad ridges. Their only protection against the cold is provided by shelters which they erect in stony hollows with the aid of ground sheets. They have not been worried yet by enemy aircraft. The heavy banks of cloud hanging low over the mountains make bombing difficult."

The Germans probably suffered as severe casualties at Amindaion and Sotir just to the south of it as anywhere during the campaign. It was clear, however, that it was only a question of time before the small Mackay force would be overwhelmed by weight of numbers. Since the enemy could not be held, the whole front had to pivot so as not to be outflanked.

### III. *The Crucial Battles*

THE NEW LINE ran from the same point on the coast, round the base of Mount Olympus, north-west to Servia, then along the Aliakmon river and then to west of Kozani. The withdrawal of the Mackay force was covered by the United Kingdom armoured Brigade which retired from Sotir to a position south of Ptolemaïs. In the early afternoon of April 13th, Blenheims with fighter escort, which had been attacking enemy motor transport, estimated that there were 2,000 enemy motor vehicles moving south-east from Vevi, with the head of the column at Ptolemaïs.

As the enemy came through Ptolemaïs they were engaged by our gunners over open sights and great slaughter and confusion were caused. The German tanks then advanced under cover of a smoke screen and came under British artillery fire at point blank range. British casualties during this action were negligible. The British armoured Brigade then fell back on Grevena. Half an hour after

hey had left, the British positions were heavily shelled by the enemy. Later he re-established contact, with motor cyclists, infantry and carriers. Very heavy fighting followed on the left of the new line, the Germans attacking with tanks.

The Greek Divisions fighting with the British were stationed on the Kozani plain. These were engaged by very heavy forces of German tanks and, after fighting valiantly, practically ceased to exist as a fighting force. The British left flank was again exposed and further withdrawal was necessary. The weight of the German attack would have made it necessary in any case. By eight o'clock of the evening of April 14th, German tanks were within 300 yards of Brigade headquarters.

That night further withdrawal was ordered to the mouth of the Aliakmon river. German losses at Servia and at many points along the Aliakmon had been considerable. Eleven enemy tanks were destroyed without loss to themselves by one anti-tank troop.

Writing on April 13th, an Australian correspondent had said: "Our men have not yet been worried by enemy aircraft." The German Air Force was playing a large part the day after he wrote. Eight of our Blenheims, which had been attacking enemy motor transport in close column on the road north of Ptolemaïs, observed a large number of Ju 87's, escorted by Me. 109's, bombing east of Kozani. Later in the morning of the 14th, aircraft of a Hurricane squadron based on Larisa attacked a large formation of Ju 87's engaged in dive-bombing the Servia area, and shot down two confirmed and four unconfirmed. The same morning a Hurricane on reconnaissance observed continuous enemy motor transport stretching for ten miles on the road south of Ptolemaïs. The same aircraft noticed 300 enemy lorries held up by a down-up bridge in the plain between the mouths of the Vardar and the Aliakmon rivers. The anti-aircraft fire from these columns was intense.



Writing on April 17th, an Australian correspondent gives a picture very different from the earlier one. It was published in *The Times* of April 19th :

"For two days I have been bombed, machine-gunned and shot at by all and sundry. German Stukas have blown two cars from under me and have strafed a third. . . . All day and all night there have been waves of Germans in the sky. Eighteen Messerschmitts strafed us on the road last evening. Bullets ripped the trucks, and one was destroyed, but nobody was hurt and nothing lost except the truck. Before that, the convoy I was in was attacked seven times in two hours, but not once was the convoy disorganised or broken up. The Germans are using a fantastic amount of aircraft : more than I ever saw in Norway under similar conditions of terrain. Göring must have a third of his air force operating here, and it is bombing every nook and cranny, hamlet, village and town in its path . . ."

### *Guns in the Mountains*

Describing the fighting, the same correspondent wrote :

"Using a new weapon, a 105 cm. big gun on tank tracks and moving under its own power, the Germans poured millions of pounds of shells on to the roads and defences. . . . For four hours the battle went on at the entrance to the Kozani Pass, and then all the way back through the pass hundreds of oncoming Germans fell to the now combined British and Australian fire. One Australian unit hung on so long firing on the Germans below that they were twenty miles behind the German lines. They escaped along the creek to Kozani."\*

The correspondent continues :

"Finally south from Kozani the Germans were blocked again when Australian sappers blew up a bridge over the Aliakmon river. The approach to the bridge was flat, and again the Germans came over in masses. 'I would not have

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\* One of the small streams running south of Kozani to the Aliakmon, west of Servia, is probably meant.

believed it,' a young Australian machine-gunner said to me. 'They came up the side of the road like flies, shouting something. We were giving it them from all sides and they went down like you see in the movies. It was just like a movie.' Every time the Germans tried to repair the bridge they got smashed about more from the big gun sitting up on the mountains. The Germans sent up infantry to get the guns but they were beaten back every time. Finally the big 105's came up, but the British guns had already done their job and withdrawn.

"I have spoken to men coming back, and they have all got individual stories that are unbelievable unless you are here with that artillery going off before you, the rain sizzling down, the cold and the wet, the rumbling and the silence making the background of battle. The whine of the transport up in the hills. The deep dark valleys showing the flash of the battle below. The shells bursting in a red flash. And you tense and waiting for the sound to reach you seconds later but never hearing it because the deep mocking laugh of the explosions is continuous."

That brilliant description shows what the men who were there felt and how their senses took in the battle. We turn again to tracing movements on the map, remembering that the units we are dealing with were made up of men—that they were not flags stuck into a map—that they broke up, disintegrated and reformed, and that as they retreated and advanced they left behind them the silent figures of the dead.

### *Shortening the Line*

While the Australian forces on the left fell back at Kalabaka, the right wing, of New Zealanders, fell back on each side of Mount Olympus, holding a position at Tirnavos and the Pinios gorge—the vale of Tempe of antiquity. This withdrawal and that which followed were to alter the whole air position for the worse.

The small New Zealand force holding the Pinios

gorge was attacked by greatly superior forces. Two Australian battalions went to its aid. Together they fought two German Divisions. They inflicted severe losses on the enemy, thanks chiefly to their artillery; but they suffered many casualties themselves. If the break through was to be avoided, a further withdrawal was necessary.

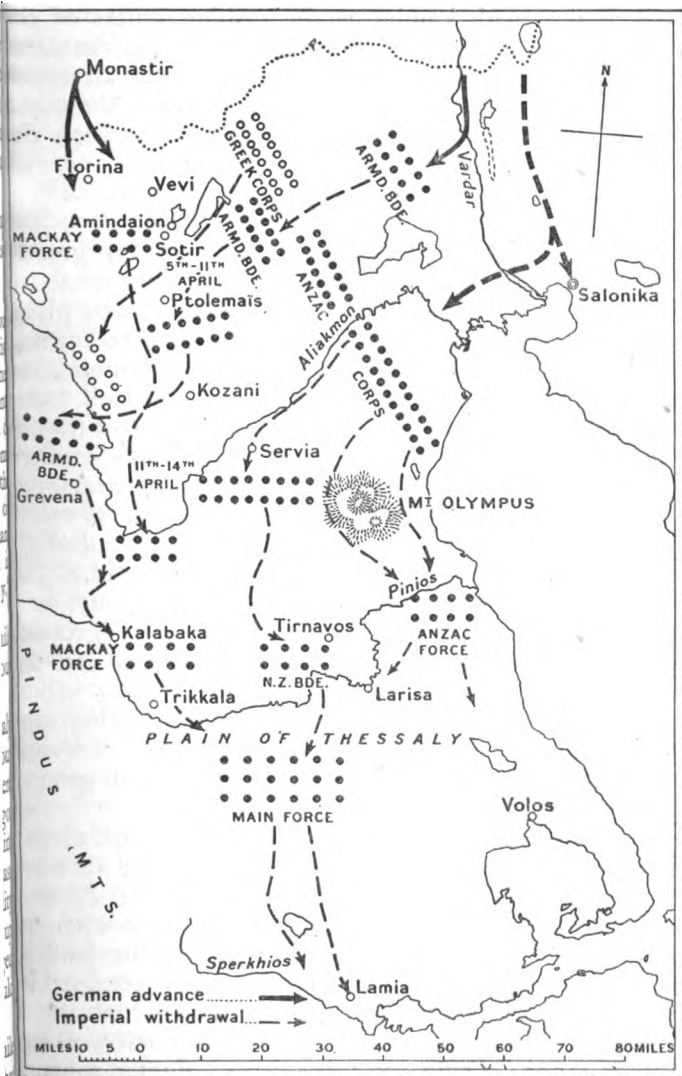
An Australian correspondent writing on April 22nd for *The Times* described the withdrawal of one of these battalions which came from New South Wales.

"They reached the em-bussing point in darkness without incident, and moved off stealthily. They set off for Larisa but, when they got near, motorcyclists came along the lines declaring that the Germans were already in Larisa, and pointing to the flares going up from that town. The long line of trucks turned, some towards Ayia, east of Larisa, and some towards Volos, in an effort to get round Larisa. Most of the brigade when they got to Ayia found it was a dead end and on their return found that Larisa was actually held by the Germans . . . some who went to Volos are trying to come south in Greek fishing boats . . . they were still coming in yesterday."

Larisa was actually surrounded by the enemy while the Anzac troops were in it. They fought their way out with Tommy-guns and rifles.

Stretching south of the Pinios is the plain of Thessaly—wide valleys broadening out from the hills. Once our troops had fallen back from the line of the Pinios, there was no stopping until they had crossed the plain and got beyond the first line of hills south of Lamia—a point where the sea comes close in to what used to be the pass of Thermopylae. There was no doubt as to the desirability of the very much shorter line which could be taken up there, in the waist of Greece. In spite of the changed conditions, it was a position which a small force could hold for a very long time against great odds.

As our troops fell back, the weather changed, and while they were holding Thermopylae it was often so hot that



many looked with longing at the rushing waters of the river Sperkhios. Several factors changed the character of the fighting from that time on. The German air attack became even more concentrated and violent; the tanks less so. It became almost a one-sided war between the German Air Force and our men on the ground.

*"Bombed and Strafed Day and Night"*

Royal Air Force fighter opposition was very greatly diminished, first because we had been compelled to evacuate all our forward aerodromes on the Larisa plain, and secondly on account of enemy attacks on the landing grounds to which they had moved. Furthermore, the German bombers had perfect weather for attack. Air bombing, however, is not nearly so deadly in a mountainous country like Greece as it is in a flat country like Holland. It is difficult to bomb a man crouching behind a rock on a steep hillside. What in level country would be a near miss, fatal of effect, will fall some way below him, or explode high above his head. The German bombers were most dangerous to our men using roads, or holding positions on level ground, or beaches. Their attacks were very intense, for the German Air Force began using bases in Thessaly within a few hours of the German forward troops having captured them. They were able to supply these forward bases by troop-carrying aircraft which brought up ground staff, fuel and munitions by air.

The position of the Royal Air Force had become almost desperate. The effects of the loss of the forward air bases and landing grounds operated in several ways. Aircraft can be made much less vulnerable to air attack when on the ground if dispersal to a number of satellite landing grounds is possible. Our aircraft were now confined to a few aerodromes on which the enemy could concentrate his attacks. Moreover, the German Air Force was working at short range. Owing to these causes, fighter support

for our troops almost ceased just when it was needed most. Our fighters were hopelessly outnumbered, their losses were severe, and their energies were occupied in the hopeless task of defending their own aerodromes.

### *Thermopylae*

While the gallant rearguard action was being fought out at the Pinios gorge, the main force had fallen back from Kalabaka, through Trikkala towards Lamia. By April 20th our troops were holding new positions on the line south of Lamia from the sea to the pass of Thermopylae and thence along the crest of the mountains overlooking the river Sperkhios through the Parnassos range to the Gulf of Corinth. The New Zealanders on the right flank opened the dykes to make the marshland by the sea impassable.

Our forces held the position for four days and could undoubtedly have held it for very much longer. British artillery was in action. On April 24th, one battery was bombed and machine-gunned all day from the air, but fired continually, engaging an enemy bridge-head. Two enemy tank attacks were driven off by this battery during the day. At half-past ten that night the battery received orders to blow up its guns and retire.

Artillery formed part of our rearguard, and there can be no doubt that the enemy's greatest losses were due to his advancing in face of artillery fire from carefully-chosen positions. The enemy advance came to a stop. His three armoured Divisions and the mountain Division drew together at the focal point of Lamia before trying to force the position at Thermopylae. The Germans do not make frontal attacks on very strong positions if they can find a way round. They always try and outflank a position, and parachute troops are particularly useful for this purpose. The Adolph Hitler S.S. Motorised Division had not pressed after our forces to the south, but, had turned west, crossing the Pindus

(properly, Pindhos) mountains by the only available road near the Greek-Albanian frontier. It pushed forward rapidly behind the main Greek armies in Albania and reached Yannina on April 20th. Florina, the railhead for supplies, had already been taken several days earlier. After the capture of Yannina there was no communication, except by sea, between the main Greek forces and the rest of Greece. The "Army of the Epirus" was thus surrounded and forced to capitulate. As explained earlier, the Greeks preferred to surrender to the Germans. Had they yielded to the Italians they would have felt disgraced for ever. They even made it a condition of surrender that the Italians should not be allowed to enter Greece; but, needless to say, the Germans did not honour this condition after the surrender became effective.

#### IV. *The Evacuation*

ON APRIL 21ST, after the Imperial forces had taken up their positions on the Thermopylae line, the Greek Government realised that further resistance in Greece was not possible, and therefore requested that the British forces should be withdrawn. After that it was merely a question of holding the enemy till evacuation could be carried out.

The decision to leave Greece was not lightly reached. General Wavell himself visited Athens to make certain of the attitude of the Greek Government. That attitude was quite simple and magnificently honourable: "You have done your best to save us. We are finished. But the war is not lost. Therefore save what you can of your Army to help to win it elsewhere." That was easier said than done. There was always the danger that our lines of communication would be cut by the enemy working round the flanks or dropping parachutists in our rear. Moreover, we had to time our evacuation for the period

when there was little or no moonlight, because the Germans were not operating their aircraft on dark nights. The latest possible date to begin an evacuation which must take several nights was therefore April 28th. It proved possible (and imperative owing to the collapse of Greek assistance) to begin evacuation some days earlier, thanks to thorough previous reconnaissance of embarkation ports and beaches, and to the use of every available M.T. vehicle to get our men back. If we had missed the period of dark nights, we should have had to wait for another month and then it might well have been too late to save anybody.

The capitulation of the Greek main forces, the "Army of the Epirus" left the Germans in Yannina free to move against us. Part of their forces were fortunately delayed by a fierce action on the coast at Preveza, where Greek forces fought with great gallantry and were badly cut up. The S.S. Division then swept on down the road to Missolonghi (properly, Mesolongion), where Byron died, and to Andirion. From these two points they were able to cross the arm of the sea in the Peloponnisos, the southern peninsula of Greece. It had, however, taken them six days from the capture of Yannina to reach Patrai, and the evacuation of our troops had already begun on the night of April 24th-25th. In a desperate attempt to prevent our troops from entering the Peloponnisos, the Germans dropped parachute troops in the neighbourhood of Corinth. The Hitler S.S. Division afterwards joined up with these, who in some accounts were said to number as many as 2,000.

Broadly speaking, this particular attack came just too late to catch our men north of the Corinth canal. They missed General Wilson himself and his H.Q. staff by a few hours. Apart from the forces that got over the canal in time, many men filtered through the parachute cordon; and the bridge over the canal was most gallantly destroyed by two officers after the parachutists had landed.

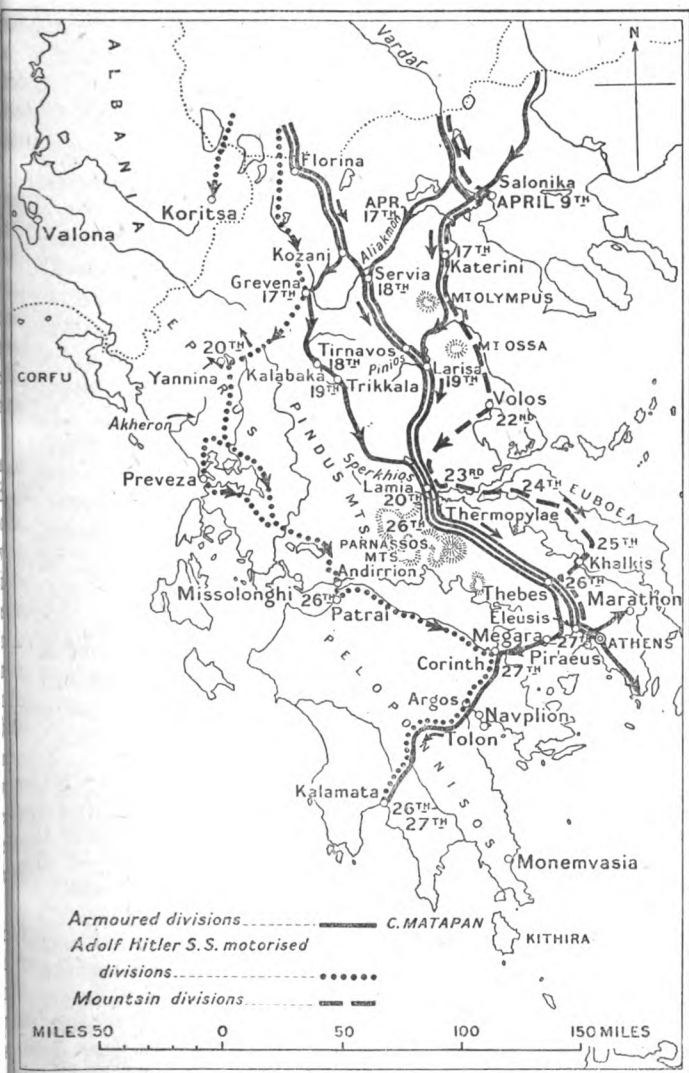


While we were still holding him at Thermopylae, the enemy made another attempt to outflank us by a landing on the island of Euboea (Evvoia), and captured Khalkis on April 25th. But by then our forces had fallen back to Thebes (Thivai) where a New Zealand force fought a rearguard action on April 26th.

The dominating factor during the evacuation was the German Air Force. Enemy air attack was in such strength that our ships could not use the larger Greek ports, such as the Piraeus. Nor could our troops go openly to their ports of embarkation. Every movement had to be made at night, while they lay hidden during the day. To the Germans, a large part of our forces must have seemed to have disappeared into thin air. Before they could be located, they had been withdrawn.

The German air attacks had concentrated on the Piraeus, the port of Athens. They attacked it on April 7th, damaging the docks considerably. On the night of April 11th, a hospital ship had been sunk during a heavy raid and an oil tanker set on fire. The port and its approaches had been strewn with magnetic mines. Three enemy aircraft were shot down by A.A. fire that night. On April 14th a daylight raid had been followed by one at night, during which our fighters shot down four enemy bombers and probably destroyed another four. On April 20th a big air battle took place over Athens. Fourteen Hurricanes were available and were sent up to drive off at least 100 enemy aircraft—dive-bombers escorted by fighters—which were attacking the docks. Fourteen enemy aircraft were shot down at a cost of half the Hurricanes.

The German Air Force was in overwhelming strength and could send over wave after wave of fresh aircraft and fresh pilots. During the last days the squadrons of the Royal Air Force were being withdrawn to Egypt and the odds against the last of our pilots became impossibly high. Fighter pilots can only stay a certain number



of hours in the air ; then they have to come down. The inevitable result of our weakness in numbers was that we lost many aircraft on the ground.

### *In Good Spirits and Good Order*

The absence of fighter protection made it impossible for our ships to come in to the Greek coast, or to take off troops by daylight. This was the great difference between the evacuation from Greece and that from Dunkirk. The other difference was that our men had been withdrawn in lorries, in good order and with all their equipment. In France our men were dead beat with marching and fighting before they got to the beaches. The evacuation from Greece was carried out from numerous small ports and beaches, the principal of which are shown on the map on page 41.

The greater part of our forces had gone across the Isthmus of Corinth some time before the Germans attempted to seize it by dropping parachute troops. One account gives the number of parachutists at 2,000: others speak of a few hundred.

The Special Correspondent of *The Times* was one who crossed into the Peloponnisos. His account, published on May 2nd, described the splendid spirit of the Greek population till the end :

“It was with thumbs up and shouts of ‘Nike, Nike’ (Victory) that they said their last farewell to their departing Allies. . . . The convoy with whom I moved assembled after dusk on Wednesday evening and travelled slowly—a long snake of more than 100 vehicles—down the coastal road and across the Corinth canal. Dawn found us at Navplion. . . . There men and vehicles were dispersed and concealed among the olive groves. All day we lay under the trees, watching German aircraft cruising undisturbed, bombing here, machine-gunning there. We were fortunate, for until the evening the enemy did not suspect that many thousand men were lying hidden round the village. Then he dropped a score of bombs

which happily did little damage. Afterwards the dark columns re-formed again, and after wrecking their cars and destroying their over-cumbrous equipment, moved down to the quay where three steamers had silently crept in."

Other parties went to Raftis and to Marathon, from which they were withdrawn on the nights of April 24th-25th and 26th-27th.

The Captain of the anti-aircraft cruiser Calcutta, who had been at Dunkirk and at Aandalsnes, gave details of the ships playing a part in the evacuation to the Special Correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* :

"The whole thing was different from Dunkirk in this—the task of transporting the men from shore to ship was slower as they were heavily laden with all their equipment. But they were not exhausted. Most of them had been resting under trees, waiting for us to pick them up when darkness fell. All these operations were carried out without a single light, and as far as I know not a life was lost accidentally."

### *The Ordeal of the Beaches*

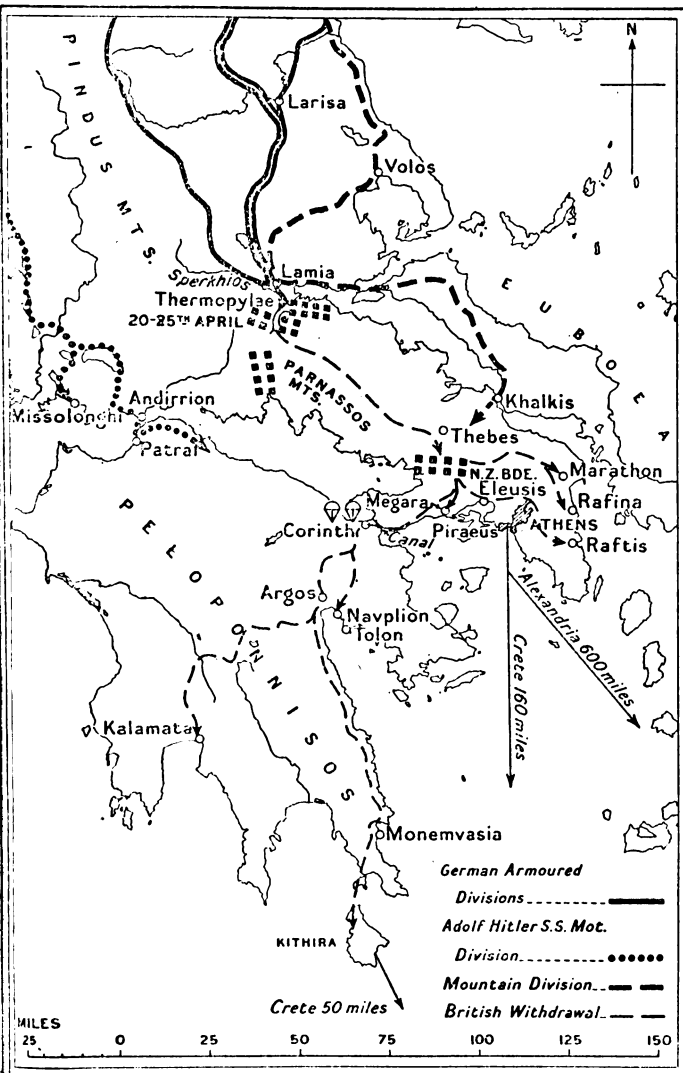
The first convoy of which the Calcutta formed part included three transports and escorting craft. On the afternoon of April 24th it split into two groups. The Calcutta with one transport went to Raftis, south-east of Athens, while the other transports with the destroyers went to Navplion.

"We embarked 700 men," said the Captain, "while our transport took on 5,000. One of the transports sent to Navplion ran aground and was so heavily dive-bombed that she became a wreck. The other one and the destroyers took on as many as they could and kept their rendezvous with us at eight next morning in the Ægean. At eleven that morning three Ju. 87's made a sharp and accurate attack, but we escaped damage and disembarked 13,500 troops."

Another A.A. cruiser, H.M.S. Coventry, with destroyers and a merchantman, embarked 5,500 men from Megara,

between Athens and Corinth, the same night. On April 26th the *Calcutta* returned to Greece. "I took three merchantmen with me," said the Captain, "and made for Navplion. The rest of the ships in my convoy, with escorting destroyers, went to Raftis and another fishing port, Rafina. At four that afternoon, after we had separated, we had a sharp attack from eighteen Ju. 87's and 88's attacking in two waves of nine machines. They hit one of my transports in the engine room, disabling her, while a second vessel was hit by a small bomb but not badly damaged. When it was over I ordered the destroyer *Griffin* to stand by the crippled transport, which was towed into port. With the other two I arrived at Navplion about ten o'clock. I took 960 men aboard while the destroyers *Hotspur* and *Isis* took 500 and 400. So far the weather had been perfect, but that night the wind got up with a choppy sea which made boat work most difficult. The cruisers *Orion* and *Perth*, with the destroyer *Stuart*, appeared before midnight and embarked men from *Tolon*. These ships took on about 2,500 men. Further west the cruiser *Phœbe*, at the head of another group, was evacuating men from Kalamata. I was anxious to be going, as the Germans had occupied the aerodrome at Argos a few miles north of Navplion.

"At seven o'clock in the morning, April 27th, bombers came over and did not leave us until 10 a.m. We were shooting so accurately that again and again we put them off. About 7.15 one transport was hit and began sinking. I ordered the *Diamond* alongside to take off troops, and about 9 a.m. three more destroyers, the *Wryneck*, *Vampire* and *Voyager*, joined us in the battle with the dive-bombers, so I detached the *Wryneck* to help with the rescue work. In that three hours the *Calcutta* fired about 1,200 rounds of four-inch shells and many thousand rounds of pom-pom and machine-gun ammunition. The *Coventry* came out to relieve me, enabling me to disembark them and return to the convoy in the after-



noon. One more transport was sunk, but we got all the survivors safely ashore. Then with fourteen vessels we set out and arrived without further incident yesterday."

Altogether on the night of April 26th-27th, 16,000 men of the Imperial forces were withdrawn from Greece. Over 8,000 of these were taken off from the Kalamata area. The destroyers *Diamond* and *Wryneck* which, as stated by the Captain of the *Calcutta*, had taken off survivors from the burning transport, were themselves hit by bombs and both were sunk. The *Diamond* had about 600 men from the transport on board and the *Wryneck* 100. The transport itself had been sunk with a torpedo from the *Diamond*. Some fifty survivors from the *Diamond* and *Wryneck* were picked up. The survivors from these destroyers were repeatedly attacked by machine-gun fire from German aircraft while they were in the water.

On the night of April 27th-28th about 4,200 men were withdrawn from the neighbourhood of Raftis by ships of the Royal Navy. Some of them had previously gone to the port of Eleusis (properly, Elefsis), a short distance west of the Piraeus. There they had remained hidden till night, and had then driven through the darkened streets of Athens to Raftis.

The following night it had been planned to embark about 8,000 troops and a number of Yugoslav refugees from the Kalamata area, but soon after midnight our ships found that Kalamata was in the hands of the enemy. In spite of this, 500 men were got away from Kalamata. The same night 3,750 of our troops were withdrawn from Monemvasia and 750 R.A.F. personnel from the island of Kithira.

On the night of April 29th-30th British destroyers again searched the Kalamata area, but only thirty-three officers and men were found. Another search of the Kalamata area was made on the night of April 30th-May 1st and twenty-three officers and 179 men were

found and embarked. No further attempts at rescue could have been successfully undertaken.

Those are the figures night by night of the withdrawal of our forces undertaken under extremely difficult circumstances by our navy and merchant marine. But the evacuation was not only by sea. Rescue work was also done by air, though, of course, on a far smaller scale. It had begun, before the evacuation of Greece had been decided on, with the rescue of the young King of Yugoslavia and members of his Government in two Sunderland flying boats on April 17th. Some remarkable rescues were carried out by them, assisted by two flying boats of British Overseas Airways Corporation.

While this evacuation was proceeding it was also necessary for our Sunderlands to carry out reconnaissance over the Mediterranean throughout the hours of daylight, to guard against possible raids by the Italian Navy against our transports and ships engaged in the evacuation. Thus in addition to spending the hours of daylight in reconnaissance, the Sunderlands went on to take part in the rescue work at night. Their Captains and crews therefore went without sleep or rest, while engaged in the most delicate, exhausting work.

## *V. The Battle for Crete*

ALL THROUGH the first three days of June, 1941, a few spectators allowed on the quays of the ports of Egypt saw processions of weary, unshaven men, staggering down the gangways of ships. The physical ordeal through which they had passed could be judged by the tattered strips of leather to which even their tough Army boots had been reduced. They were the survivors—United Kingdom, Australian and New Zealand troops—of the garrison of Crete. Many of them were also survivors of



the expeditionary force in Greece. It says much for these men that after two such experiences their spirit was unbroken. Some, at least, of them have since had a taste of revenge for this double exposure to the worst that a relentless enemy could inflict upon human targets.

The island of Crete had (as already related) been occupied by the British, at the request of the Greek Government, in November, 1940, in order to prevent its seizure by the Italians. But it had not been heavily garrisoned. There were neither men nor material to make it into what the Germans (when they attacked) were pleased to call a "fortress." We staked what we had first on defeating the Italians in North Africa, and secondly on trying to hold the mainland of Greece. When we lost this second stake, the only question was whether or not to stake anything more on trying to hold Crete. At the end of April, General Wavell decided that the attempt should be made. It did not succeed; but the course of the story may be anticipated enough to say that the attempt was well worth making.

At the outset, it seemed by no means hopeless. There were few fresh troops in Crete, but the numbers of the original garrison had been more than doubled by men evacuated from Greece. There were also eleven Greek battalions—garrison and recruit formations. There were the Cretans themselves—and a race which has produced the dynamic figure of M. Venizelos is not to be despised. They had often been troublesome to Greek Governments; but there was not a Quisling among them. Finally, the island itself seemed well adapted for defence. In shape it is like a badly gnawed ham in which two great bites have produced two waists—one, about eight miles across, near the Gulf of Merabello, and the other much further west, about eighteen miles across, from the Bay of Almiros to Cape Kakomouri. No doubt these waists invited seizure by an invader. But if he came by sea, there was the British Navy; and if he came by air, the

country was most unsuited for landings. To return to the simile of a ham, the surface has been hacked about by a most intemperate carver. Nowhere has he cut a clean slice. He has put in the point of his knife and prised out gobbets, making precipitous ravines and leaving inhospitable peaks. If, therefore, the three aerodromes on the island—Maleme near Khania (Canea), Rethimnon (or Retimo) and Iraklion (or Candia)—could be held, there seemed an excellent chance of preventing an invasion by landings from the air; and, as for parachutists, there were no nodal points other than the aerodromes for them to seize, and their numbers could not be inexhaustible.

But there were weaknesses in these calculations. The troops evacuated from Greece were in much the same shape as the troops evacuated from Dunkirk. Each individual had brought away what he could, including a stout heart. But they were not a formed army and even less an equipped army. Nearly all had their rifles, and a few had brought away light machine-guns; but they lacked every other kind of weapon. They had been bombed and shelled to blazes, not merely in Greece, but on the sea passage from Greece to Crete, and some had only the clothes found for them by the sailors who had picked them out of the sea. Many were lines-of-communication troops—British, Cypriot and Palestinian. No artillery had been saved from Greece, and no transport. Above all, there were hardly any aircraft on the island; and this fact had such a bearing on the subsequent campaign that it requires a little elaboration.

### *The Problem of Air Support*

The three aerodromes on the island could clearly not serve as a base for a large air force. They were within a few minutes' flight of the aerodromes on the mainland and within easy reach of enemy air bases on the Dodecanese. Any machines trying to operate from Crete

would have been so much bomb-fodder ; and therefore no attempt was made to keep any there after the main attack was launched. There was no other base nearer than North Africa, 400 miles away. Fighter aircraft cannot operate at such a range, because they cannot carry enough petrol. An attempt was in fact made to overcome this handicap by fitting extra tanks on to Hurricanes, but the experiment was not successful : the effect on the operational efficiency of the machine was too great. Bombers could and did operate at such a range. But the result of daylight attacks by bombers without fighter escort is well known—not least to the Luftwaffe. Our bombers several times during the campaign in Crete did attack by day, but their main effort had to be made by night, and to be directed against the German air-bases in Greece where they did great but not crippling damage. From the outset, therefore, it was known that Crete could only be defended from the land and from the water and that the enemy would be completely masters of the air.

### *The Problem of Disposition*

So far as the land defences were concerned, the account already given of the composition and resources of the garrison shows the great difficulties of General Freyberg who, after commanding the New Zealanders in Greece, was given charge of all the troops in Crete. He succeeded Major-General E. C. Weston, Royal Marines, who, up to that time, had been the Senior Officer in the Island. He had to cut his coat according to his cloth (much of which was part-worn) and to cut it with a pair of nail scissors. Moreover, his was a rush-job. There is an Irish fairy story of a tailor who made a bet that he would cut and sew a pair of trousers on the roof of an enchanted castle. The bet was dangerous because unless he could finish before an appointed hour, he knew that a horrible ogre would emerge through the roof and finish him.

The story tells how the head of the ogre came through soon after the tailor had settled to his task, and how at regular intervals the ogre's neck, shoulders, arms, body and right leg followed. In the story, the tailor, by stretching his stitches, just finished before the ogre got his left leg through. In Crete, the ogre got free before General Freyberg finished his stitching.

This was not due to any miscalculation of the enemy's speed. Some critics have thought it extraordinary that the Germans could have organised so highly complicated an attack in less than three weeks after completing their conquest of Greece. The truth is that they did not take "only three weeks," but more like eight years. Eight years' work had given them the abundance of material, the air-borne troops, the detailed plans, and the perfected technique which gave them Crete. They could hop their aeroplanes from aerodrome to aerodrome along the 1,200 miles from factory to battlefield. They could wheel their troops and guns along uninterrupted roads and railways. So the speed at which their attack developed was not unexpected. General Freyberg got ready for battle as fast as he could. General Wavell sent him as much as he could. Their best was a good best, and they are not to blame that it was not good enough.

In Crete itself there were, at the end of April, between 27,000 and 28,000 men, exclusive of the eleven Greek battalions. Not all were combatant troops; and not a quarter were fresh troops. The original garrison was little more than the 14th Infantry Brigade (consisting of the 2nd Black Watch, the 2nd York and Lancaster Regiment, and the 1st Welch Regiment), Royal Marines belonging to the Marine Naval Base Defence Organisation and a few troops of A.A. and Coast Defence Artillery. The Royal Marines were in the command of Major-General Weston and he eventually took over from Major-General Freyberg in the very latest stages of the evacuation. The Marines were mostly specialists belonging

to a Royal Marine organisation which included anti-aircraft and coast artillery units as well as searchlight and maintenance units. All continued to operate and to fire their weapons until those weapons were put out of action by air attack. They then formed themselves into infantry units and fought as such. The forces already in the island had been joined by the tired and more or less disorganised men from Greece (the survivors of the 4th and 5th New Zealand Infantry Brigades and of the 6th Australian Division) who had to be formed into new units. Thus the Australians and New Zealanders were sorted out at reception camps and re-formed. Composite infantry units were formed out of gunners who had lost their guns, sappers who had lost their tools and R.A.S.C. drivers who had lost their cars. A staff to run the battle had to be improvised by calling in regimental officers; few of whom had had any staff training. Trenches, gun emplacements, wire obstacles and demolitions had to be prepared, and such was the lack, even of spades, that men used their steel helmets to scoop out slit trenches. British officers were attached to the Greek battalions which had had little training, and no equipment beyond rifles and twenty rounds a rifle. All that the available ships and the available time allowed was sent from Egypt by General Wavell. Apart from munitions and supplies, the weapons landed before May 20th were eighteen A.A. guns, four 3.7 howitzers, six "I" tanks and sixteen light tanks. The reinforcements in men during this period were the gun and tank crews and one battalion of infantry, the 2nd Leicesters, which was the advance unit of the 16th Infantry Brigade.

### *The Problem of Supply*

All these supplies and reinforcements had to run the gauntlet of air attacks, which were persistent even before the battle opened, and extremely heavy afterwards.

These attacks seriously lessened the reinforcements of men and material which could be landed. For example, during the battle one further battalion of the 16th Infantry Brigade (the 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders) got ashore, but the ship carrying Brigade H.Q. and the third battalion was hit and had to return to Alexandria. The only other troops landed were two Commandos who, with an Australian battalion, fought gallant rearguard actions all the way back from Soudha to Sfakia, when all but a few of their men had to be left behind. It must also be noted that, though an effort was made to use Timbaki during the battle, the only decent port of entry was Soudha. Rethimnon could only take coastal vessels and Iraklion nothing larger than a destroyer. Most of our ships therefore had to go round to the north side of the Island. The ports on the south were too small and too undeveloped for large-scale supply, and there was not transport enough on the Island to carry anything substantial from south to north. Indeed, up to a few days before the battle no unit had any transport of its own, for everything available had to be pooled and used for common purposes. There was only one road along the north coast, and only three roads from north to south fit for motor traffic. Two were cut early in the battle by parachutists, and the third (to Sfakia) stopped seven miles short of the coast. This lack of ports, roads and transport profoundly affected General Freyberg's dispositions. He had to split his force into garrisons, and even if he had had enough for a reserve, that reserve could not have been mobile in default of roads and of transport. On this scene of making bricks without straw fell the German attack.

### *The Assault Begins*

At eight o'clock on the morning of May 20th watchers at H.Q. on the hillside above Khania heard the all too

familiar drone of enemy aircraft sweeping in from the sea. A few minutes later Maleme aerodrome was covered with the spouts of bursting bombs, and the air was loud with the chatter of machine-guns. The attack was much heavier than any nuisance raid, and, sure enough, three-quarters of an hour later, the air-borne invasion began. Over Maleme aerodrome itself appeared low-flying machines towing groups of gliders, some not more than two, some as many as five. In all, there were about fifty gliders, each containing twelve men with equipment, light, but of considerable fire-power. Over four other areas—east of the aerodrome, in the valley between the Prison and Lake Ayia, near Galatas, and near Pírgos—troop carriers dropped their loads of parachutists. The parachutists were white, grey-green and brown. They came down quickly from a low level—not more than 300 feet—and from a distance looked like handfuls of confetti.

An Australian A.A. officer who had commanded a gun on the mole at Iraklion described to a correspondent of *The Times* his experiences of a parachute attack which developed round the town during the afternoon. The huge three-motored troop-carriers came over in flocks of fifteen, each dropping its cargo and swinging away and out to make room for the next flock. The parachutists came down on to ground deliberately pitted in advance with craters to give them cover, throwing grenades and firing Tommy-guns as they came. The Australian officer saw even light guns, supported by a triangle of parachutes, coming down; and he perceived that both men and equipment were being dropped to form a neat semi-circle round the town. His gun fired every round it had, and brought down three troop-carriers in flames. Then snipers closed in, and he and his men had only two rifles, one revolver and a Very pistol to defend themselves. They were lucky to get away after dark in some rowing boats which they found moored to the mole.

The earlier parachute attack on Maleme was an even more formidable affair. About 3,500 men were landed in an area ten miles by three in the early morning and late afternoon of May 20th, and within two hours the A.A. guns on the aerodrome were silenced. By the end of the day the 22nd New Zealand Battalion had been forced off its position round the aerodrome and the enemy had scored his only dangerous success. For elsewhere, the much-derided phrase that "the situation was in hand" was strictly true. Everywhere where parachutists had been dropped near our troops, as they were near the 21st and 23rd battalion areas east of the aerodrome, they had suffered crippling casualties before touching ground. In some places, four-fifths were killed as they swung in the air.

### *Iraklion is Held*

In other places, survivors were more numerous and scored temporary successes. But by the early afternoon a New Zealand company had recaptured the 7th General Hospital and a Composite Battalion had cleared Galatas. Near Pirgos, however, a troop of the Royal Artillery was permanently lost. The gunners blazed away over open sights till most of them were killed or wounded. They had no rifles for close-quarter work, and the few survivors retired after destroying three of their guns. But in spite of these local tragedies, the first day had not gone badly for the defence. At Iraklion, the United Kingdom battalions posted to protect the aerodrome saw to it that not a single live German got anywhere near it, either on this first day or throughout the battle. The great black troop-carriers with their yellow noses came lumbering in. Many were hit by A.A. fire and crashed in flames, throwing off sparks of helplessly blazing parachutists as they came down. Others were driven out of line, ran into parachutists descending from other machines and made off



festooned with the casualties of a fearful kind of air road-accident. Enough parachutists landed safely outside the perimeter defences temporarily to interrupt communications with G.H.Q. at Soudha, but on this first day there was something very like victory at Iraklion, and there was never any doubt that this sector could be held until the garrison, eight days later, had to be taken off by sea because of defeat at Maleme. In the third sector attacked, namely Rethimnon, parachutists at first captured the aerodrome, but were wiped out by a spirited counter-attack by Greek and Australian troops belonging to the 19th Australian Infantry Brigade. On the evening of May 20th, therefore, there was a good prospect that if the enemy could be driven off from Maleme and from the landing-ground which his parachutists had started to prepare in the Prison area, his whole plan would end in disaster.

### *Air-borne Thousands*

But during the next two days at Maleme the balance swung slowly but definitely in his favour. There was one distressing casualty which deserves to be put on record in any written account of the battle. This was the demise of the *Crete News*, a broadsheet which five New Zealanders had managed to produce from a press extemporised in a house in Khania. They had overcome many difficulties, including a lack of the letter W in their assortment of type. This particular hurdle was overcome by inverting capital M's. The first number of the *Crete News* appeared two days before the invasion started, and the first two numbers had a circulation of about 3,000. On invasion day, the paper duly appeared and got out 2,000 copies. But next day the Germans started methodically to flatten Khania. The editor gallantly tried to reach his office, but could not get through the blazing ruins which surrounded it. He thought that the application of a drastic kind of Regulation 2D to his paper was

complete. But at one o'clock next morning three of the printers and publishers staggered into Headquarters and deposited 600 copies of Number 4 of the *Crete News*. They had succeeded in running off this literally stop-press edition before the plant had caught fire.

To return to other phases of the Maleme battle, before nine o'clock on May 21st the enemy was rushing over his troop-carriers to land where they could, if they could and how they could. Over sixty had disgorged their reinforcements in the river valley and on beaches west of the aerodromes before the first British counter-attack could be launched; and ten times as many succeeded in making the journey during the day. When our men delivered their attack, the opposition was already so strong that though they topped Cemetery Hill by mid-day, they were blasted off it by mortar-fire. The enemy paid a high price for these tactics. Apart from crashes, five of his big troop-carriers were destroyed by a few guns firing over open sights, and a large flock of parachutists who landed at tea-time near the 28th New Zealand battalion were practically wiped out. But at the end of the day there were several thousand Germans where there had only been several hundred, and it was clear that unless they could be destroyed during the night, the shuttle of the troop-carriers would resume its work next day.

### *New Zealand Counter-Attack*

The counter-attack delivered during the night of the 21st-22nd May was therefore critical. It was delivered by the 5th New Zealand Infantry Brigade, with two battalions (the 20th and 28th) supported by a few light tanks. One of the most difficult operations in war is to improvise an attack at night. It is difficult enough even if everything has been quiet before the attack; and it will be recalled, for example, that some of the troops detailed for Mangin's great flank attack on July 18th, 1918, had

to race the last mile in order to reach their jumping-off point on time. At Maleme on the night of May 21st-22nd things were by no means quiet. The enemy was on no fixed line. Nobody quite knew where he was. His fire, coming as it seemed, from all directions, filled the air.

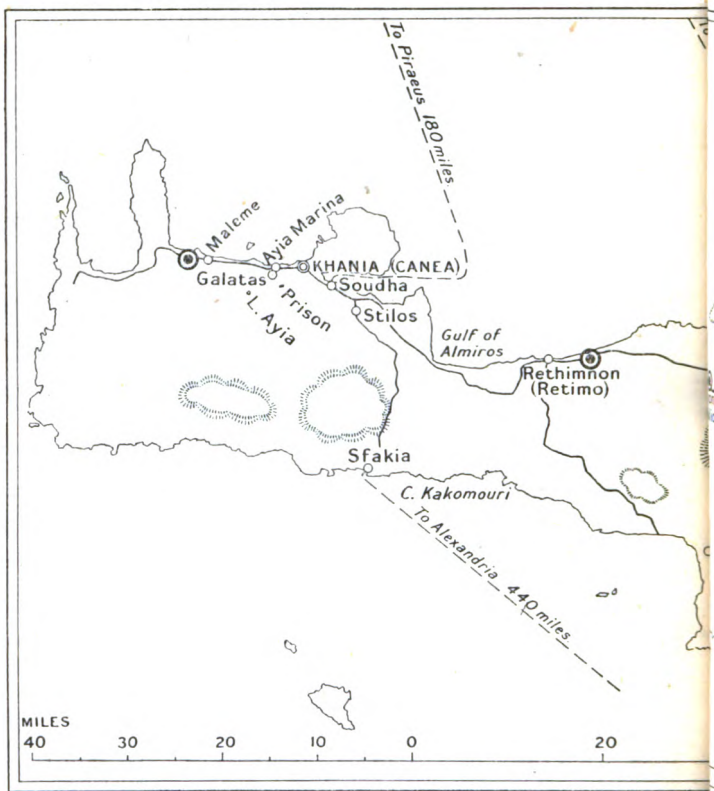
It is not easy for the critic, strolling along an English country road in the pleasant and quiet darkness of a spring night, to understand how difficult it is to move bodies of troops even a few miles on a night of battle. In fact it was no small feat to launch an attack at all. But it was two hours late in starting, and the delay meant that the attack had two hours less of favouring darkness. So long as that darkness lasted, it made good progress. The two battalions swept forward to the edge of the aerodrome, bayoneting everyone in their path. But as the sun rose, their advance was compelled to slacken. The casualties, especially in the 20th battalion, were heavy. The line rolled back to a position just west of that held by the 21st and 22nd battalions; and the troop-carriers started coming again. Our men could do little but watch them land, though a few guns were kept in action against the aerodrome. Late on the evening of the 22nd the enemy became strong enough to put in a local attack astride the road leading from the Prison to Galatas. He made some progress until driven back by the New Zealand Divisional "Cavalry," aided by a small party of valorous Greeks.

### *The Navy Joins Battle*

Though our counter-attack had not fully succeeded, we had had one great success on the night of May 21st-22nd which kept alive the hope that Crete could be held. About midnight watchers on the hillsides above Khania saw star-shells bursting far out at sea and two great beacons of flame from blazing ships. It was the Navy

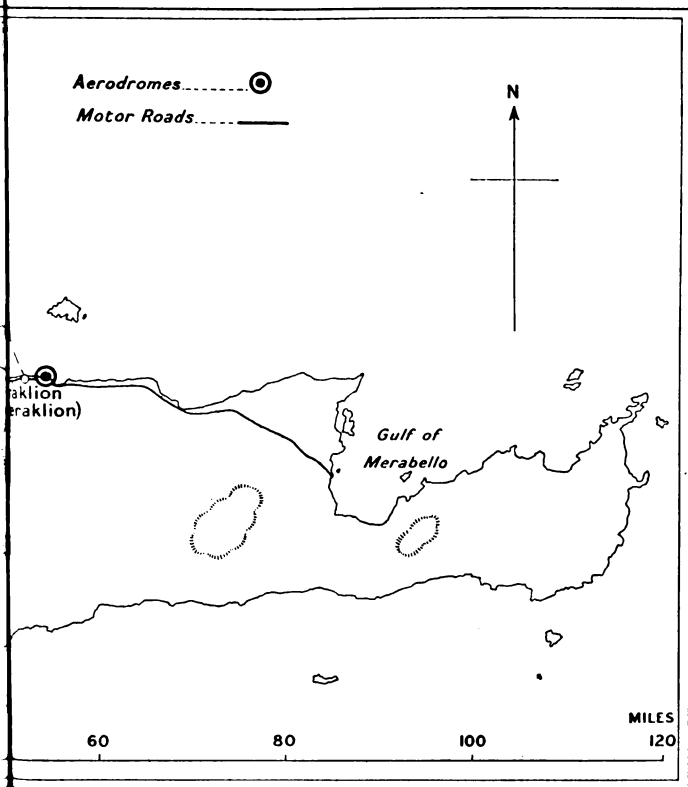
completely destroying an invasion fleet with its escorting Italian destroyer. Next day a further and larger armada was dispersed. It is outside the scope of this work to describe in any detail the exploits of the Navy in the defence of Crete. But it must be put on record that the Navy, though operating without air cover in confined waters, wholly accomplished its task of preventing any invasion by sea. Estimates of the casualties inflicted on the enemy by our ships vary between 2,000 and 5,000 men drowned. The exact number does not matter. The essential fact is that not a German came by sea to help the invaders, at least until the battle on land had been finally lost. A price was paid indeed for this magnificent accomplishment. Two cruisers and four destroyers were lost. These were a small proportion of the total naval forces engaged; and, though many others were damaged, naval losses during the action show how magnificently our ships were handled and fought. A spectator who described the arrival of a destroyer at Soudha said: "She seemed to handle like a polo pony." The gallantry of the sailors was in every way equal to their technical skill.

There was equal heroism displayed in the task of supplying our own army as in that of attempting to deny supplies to the enemy. For the first six days of the battle, naval vessels and not less gallant merchant ships managed to nose their way into Soudha port through the curtain of bombs. Some were hit and lost; others had to be beached and their supplies laboriously extracted by stevedore units improvised from every sort of material from staff officers to Cypriot pioneers. Quite a few managed to unload their cargoes almost normally, take on board casualties and steam out again. Nobody either on the ships or on the shore stopped trying to keep the stream of supplies flowing. The bells in the little church occasionally tinkled out a primitive kind of air-raid warning, but after a very short time nobody on shore took any notice of anything except actual bombs; and the sailors



never took any notice of the more grisly warnings of beached and blazing ships.

The army owed much to the Navy not only during the battle, but also after it. For it was mainly the Navy (though the part played by the flying-boats must not be forgotten) which took off the weary battalions not only from Sfakia on the south coast, but also from unsubdued Iraklion on the north coast.



### *Maleme is Decisive*

To return to the land battle, the final result of the fighting on May 22nd was that the enemy had strengthened his hold on the Maleme sector though he was firmly held at Iraklion, and at Rethimnon a party which had blocked the Khania road was driven off. But at Maleme things were serious—so much so that on May 23rd we had

to think about closing gaps in our line rather than about making gaps in his. The result was the withdrawal of the 5th Infantry Brigade to the area west of Ayia Marina, in order to link up with the 4th Infantry Brigade. A sinister feature of the day was that the enemy was able to follow up this withdrawal closely and to make dangerous-looking demonstrations against our new line. But he did not push his attack home until the following afternoon. Then, and on the two subsequent days, there was heavy fighting, our troops were gradually edged away east and south-east from the original enemy bridge-head.

There was never any cracking. Indeed, General Freyberg in his unofficial account of the operations, himself selects a counter-attack by United Kingdom light tanks (manned by a detachment of the 3rd Hussars) and the 23rd battalion of New Zealand infantry which re-took Galatas after dark on May 25th, as "one of the great efforts in the defence of Crete." Nevertheless, all real hope of defending the Maleme sector, and with it all real hope of holding Crete, ended on May 26th. Our forces were back on a line from Soudha to Stilos, with the exception of two small units holding out on the extreme right and left. Those on the left were men from the Royal Marine Searchlight Regiment, plus a few Royal Marine Coast Artillery gunners. This detachment was still fighting west of Stilos under the command of Major Garrett. The detachment on the right was on the slope of the Soudha peninsula, a little to the east of Khania. It was composed of some Royal Marines and some men from army units under the command of Captain Farrier, Royal Marines. This detachment was the remnant of the Khania garrison. It successfully held the enemy there for six days until it had to leave the town on the morning of May 26th. The aerodrome at Maleme could be used by the enemy without interruption, and though he could not bring his men in by sea, he could and did bring very strong reinforcements by air. Thoughts had perforce to

turn to evacuation; and the definite decision seems to have been taken on May 27th. It was bitter enough to the tired but indomitable Anzacs, Marines and British army units in the olive groves round Stilos and on the scarred slopes leading down to Soudha Bay, but it was surprising as well as bitter to the locally victorious garrisons at Iraklion and Rethimnon. They had more than held their own. They had taken many prisoners and inflicted enormous casualties. They had the definite feeling that the enemy's losses were outstripping even his substantial reinforcements.

At Rethimnon in particular there had been a local victory on May 26th, when the enemy, who had two days earlier established himself in some strength east of the aerodrome, was annihilated with the aid of a few "I" tanks. Thucydides was right when he said that a soldier gets his impression of how a battle is going solely from the events in his immediate neighbourhood. Though few of the garrisons at Iraklion and Rethimnon knew it at the time, there were even heavier onslaughts against them being prepared than those which they had so valorously overcome. The zone covered by our defences did not and could not extend far east of Iraklion. Outside this zone the enemy effected considerable concentration of airborne troops, and by May 27th was adding to this concentration by troops arriving by boat. He was preparing to attack Iraklion when our garrison there was successfully taken off by the Navy on the night of May 28th-29th. The fate of the Rethimnon garrison was grimmer. Their communications with Soudha were cut on May 27th by small enemy parties holding buildings along the coast and for some distance inland. An aeroplane sent to drop the order to withdraw southwards in conformity with the forces at Soudha was shot down, and Colonel Campbell, who was in command at Rethimnon, never received it. He and his Australians and Greeks held out against all attacks until May 31st,



when they succumbed to a full-dress tank attack. A few escaped to the hills, and some parties ultimately reached Egypt.

### *Saving the Garrison : the Night Evacuation*

The story of the main evacuation can be briefly told. All through the 27th and 28th of May, a heavy rearguard action was fought from north to south across the island from Soudha to Sfakia. The enemy was definitely held off in these fierce struggles, and finally, under cover of troops of the 19th Australian Infantry Brigade commanded by Brigadier Vasey, the two New Zealand Brigades reached the hills overlooking Sfakia before dusk on May 28th. Movement by day was impossible, but for three nights light craft, mainly destroyers, crept in so near the coast that their keels nearly touched bottom, and took off men in their boats. By day thousands of men lay concealed in the scrub or in the caves which dot the hillsides near Sfakia—caves which showed traces both of pre-historic and of later occupation. At dusk they crept down towards the cove, were marshalled in a long column of threes stretching down to the beach and patiently awaited their turn. There was always a doubt whether the ships could come and whether the German bombers would come. The ships always came; the bombers, in spite of continual reconnaissance by day, never came, even though on the last afternoon some enemy troops appeared over the hills and had to be mopped up. Every night, after the last boats had come and gone, those for whom there had been no room used the twilight before dawn for a bathe before scattering to cover.

Though priority was given in embarkation to the wounded, many never reached the beaches but fell into the hands of the enemy. There were not many other prisoners, and the one immediately detectable drop of comfort in a bitter draught was that the bulk of the fighting troops, apart from those lost in battle, were

aved. Unfortunately, many of the Royal Marines who had taken a prominent part in the rearguard fighting had to be left behind, and the following message from General Wavell tells its own story: "You know the heroic effort the Navy has made to rescue you. I hope you will be able to get away most of those who remain, but this is the last night the Navy can come. Please tell those that have to be left that the fight put up against such odds has won the admiration of us all and every effort to bring them back is being made. General Freyberg has told me how magnificently your marines have fought and of your own grand work. I have heard also of the heroic fighting of young Greek soldiers. I send you my grateful thanks." Among those who got away was King George of Greece, who had insisted on coming to Crete itself. With a small party of New Zealand infantrymen, he had had a fearful scramble across savage country. Though of all the party he had the most reason for sorrow and the greatest burden of years, he won their unstinted admiration by his cheerfulness and endurance. One of the reasons why there were so few except wounded prisoners, was the determination of the unwounded not to surrender. The outstanding example of this determination is that of Major Garrett of the Royal Marines, who brought a party of nearly 140 officers and men across the Mediterranean in a derelict lighter and landed them in Africa after a fearsome voyage of eight days. The story belongs more properly to the Navy's side of these battles and will be told by the Admiralty in due course. All we can say here is that this and countless other instances of heroism constituted a considerable consolation for the failure to hold the Island.

### *The Value of the Campaign*

So the Minotaur had mastered Crete; but had failed to swallow its garrison. If, however, the escape of so many

human victims had been the only unpalatable element in his meal, his satisfaction would not have been sensibly marred. Fortunately, there were other disquieting facts from his point of view. The first is that the enemy losses were at least 6,000 killed or drowned and 11,000 wounded, and these were all crack troops. He also used in his attack between 1,400 and 1,500 aircraft of all types; and used up many of them with their crews. That was the scale of forces diverted from the other campaigns which he was then planning—notably the assault on Russia. The operations which began with the revolt of Yugoslavia against tame capitulation and ended with the defence of Crete may well have destroyed a plan to drive at the Caucasus through Turkey. They certainly delayed the offensive against Russia for many critical weeks. They warded off at least for a whole year the danger of air-borne invasions against other bastions in the Middle East. They gained time for the restoration of a very tricky and dangerous situation in Syria, Iraq and Persia. If the enemy had not used up so much in Crete, he would certainly have reinforced the rebels in Iraq and the Vichy French in Syria on a most formidable scale. For these reasons, the campaign in Greece and in Crete, though tactical defeat, may well come to be considered strategic victory.

One final word about the reasons for the defeat. By common consent they were inferiority of land equipment and the enemy's practically undisputed mastery of the air. As for inferiority of land equipment, we might indeed have had more guns and more tanks in Crete if like the enemy, we had been preparing for war for eight years; but only if we had had enough to be strong everywhere could we have been strong enough in Crete. But even if every aeroplane we had produced had been in the Middle East, we could not have got any greater fighter strength over the battlefield, and we could not have smashed the air-borne invasion in the air. Even

with this colossal handicap, the issue of the battle hung in the balance for five or six days ; and the course of the battle showed that the enemy's best troops were no better than ours. Indeed, even his parachutists were of very variable quality. Most were tough soldiers who (if they escaped immediate annihilation) collected in small parties and fought until they were killed or reinforced. But quite a number were broken morally by their experience on the way down, and wandered about aimlessly until they surrendered. These prisoners were mostly men who could not find water, and were abnormally parched by the tablets of some kind of concentrated tonic which they carried.

It was not the parachutists who decided the issue, but the troops who came in the troop-carriers. About 650 of these large machines, each carrying between twenty and thirty men, were used—regardless of losses ; and the losses could not be made heavy enough. The troops they brought were met by a most resolute defence. During the nine days' fighting our men delivered no fewer than twenty bayonet attacks, and never lost their cohesion under the strain of a bombardment from the air which was practically continuous during daylight. During the final evacuation, they even obeyed an order with which British soldiers always find it most difficult to comply, namely, the order to avoid all movement by day.

There was one curious exception to this strange form of hibernation. On the second day when our men were lying concealed above Sfakia, a staff officer was horrified to see a party of fifty British soldiers marching openly down the road towards the port. He rushed up to them and found that they were a party of walking wounded who had been told by German prisoners that if they discarded their steel helmets and carried a flag with a red cross, the Luftwaffe would leave them alone. This proved to be true. The enemy did not attack them. He also

left alone a hospital ship which lay off Khania during the first few days of the battle and kept her lights blazing all night.

It must not be thought that the Germans had suddenly seen the light of humanity since the time when they had massacred refugees upon the roads of Poland, Belgium and France. They were frightened of reprisals against their own parachutists and quite guiltless of any recantation of the gospel of frightfulness. Their restraint lasted no longer than the battle. Ships carrying wounded away from the Island were mercilessly attacked. Many were heavily bombed on the way back to Egypt, and one unit actually had heavier casualties on the sea than on the land. Nevertheless, over 16,000 officers and men reached safety along that ancient sea-road from Crete to Egypt which has carried so many strange cargoes since the Minoans traded with the Pharaohs. Perhaps the great stone lions sculptured on the gates of Mycenae, the centre of the oldest civilisation in the Ægean, are an earnest that vultures will not long lord it either over the mainland or over the islands.

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